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Setback on Arms Treaty Signals New Era of Uncertainty

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 3 — The decision to put off a Senate vote on the nuclear arms treaty comes as a major setback to President Carter and signals a new era of uncertainty in the arms race between Washington and Moscow.

The treaty, concluded last June after nearly seven years of negotiations, was the centerpiece of an ambitious attempt by Mr. Carter to stabilize American and Soviet military competition around the world. Now, in the opinion of experts in and out of Government, the new treaty is practically dead and the United States must reassess its strategic and arms-control plans for the coming decade.

Even with the arms treaty, there was going to be an expansion in the nuclear arsenals of both the United States and the Soviet Union through 1985. Without the treaty, the two sides will abandon all restraints on their forces and embark on more aggressive programs for nuclear modernization.

It is clear that the decision to ask the Senate to defer debate on the arms treaty is one of the most difficult actions that Mr. Carter has taken as President. He has probably laid greater stress than any previous occupant of the White House on limiting nuclear arms with Moscow; in a speech to Democrats last May he announced: "I've only got one life to live and one opportunity to serve in the highest elected office in our land. I will never have a chance so momentous to contribute to world peace as to negotiate and to see ratified this SALT treaty."

Top Priority for 1980

In October, Mr. Carter told a group of visitors to the White House that "getting SALT II ratified" was his top priority for 1980. Only four days ago, in the wake of Moscow's intervention in Afghanistan, he informed reporters that the White House had still not given up the struggle for ratification.

This remains the Administration's official position, and while Mr. Carter has announced that the situation in Afghanistan rules out an early vote on the treaty, White House aides stressed today that Mr. Carter could renew his drive for ratification later this year.

In private, however, most Administration foreign policy aides believe that the downward drift in Soviet-American relations is unlikely to reverse soon, and that as a result the treaty will not go before the Senate for debate until well after the 1980 Presidential election.

Some strategy experts, however, believe that new Soviet and American arms deployments could make the treaty obsolete in the near future. Moreover, a newly elected administration next year could decide that it wanted to negotiate a new arms treaty from scratch. Thus, in the view of many officials, Mr. Carter's decision to defer action on the treaty was tantamount to killing it.

Difficult Questions on Treaty

The real possibility that the treaty is dead confronts both Washington and Moscow with some difficult questions. One is whether the two sides will continue to talk about other potential arms agreements covering other areas. Washington's allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are extremely interested in negotiating accords that would limit conventional and nuclear forces in Europe, and it had been assumed that the conclusion of the strategic arms treaty would accelerate talks on these issues.

Although some officials insisted that it was too soon to judge, others contended that the demise of the arms treaty was almost certain to set back efforts to limit forces in Europe and impose a ban on all American and Soviet nuclear testing.

A more immediate question is whether the two sides will continue to adhere to the terms of the 1972 strategic accords, which consisted of a treaty limiting anti-ballistic missiles and a so-called "interim agreement" restricting numbers of land- and sea-based offensive missiles. The accord covering offensive rockets expired in October 1977, but both Moscow and Washington agreed to continue to abide by its terms while negotiators worked out the details of the new treaty.

Although the outlook for the treaty is clouded, Jody Powell, Mr. Carter's spokesman, announced today that the Administration still intended to abide by the terms of the 1972 "interim agreement." But the 1972 accord gives Moscow a 40 percent advantage in overall numbers of offensive missiles, and Senate aides said that the Administration's evident plan to abide indefinitely by its terms was likely to come under strong criticism on Capitol Hill.

A bigger question, however, is whether Moscow intends to adhere to the terms of the 1972 accord. Administration specialists point out that under the agreement, Moscow is forced to retire older land-based missiles and strategic submarines as it deploys new systems. If it suddenly decided to scrap the 1972 accord, they noted, Moscow could quickly expand its numerical edge in strategic missiles by keeping its older systems intact while it added new ones.